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Developing an online course to support student transitions to university

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Developing an online course to support student transitions to university

The University of Strathclyde developed “We are Strathclyde”, an online course developed to aid the transition of incoming undergraduate students into university life. Launching in August 2016 and running over four weeks, the course introduced students to their institution, the culture of higher education learning and support services available to them. A core aim was to instil the sense of a “Strathclyde identity” before arrival.

Students were introduced to academic skills while orientating themselves in university life. They engaged in active and reflective tasks and explored a range of key skills while being introduced to a diverse range of opinion, comment and advice from current students.

The course was run on the University’s virtual learning environment and was designed to fit around the lives of students. Emphasis was placed on learning as a social activity with knowledge shared and developed between participants. This approach was supported by weekly live broadcast sessions with senior staff.

Almost 1000 students were introduced to the institution through the course. Post-course feedback indicated that they felt more knowledgeable, supported and confident in embarking on university life.

In this paper, we examine how the design process was grounded in theory of community of inquiry, building on lessons from the development of a suite of successful and engaging MOOCs.

Introduction

In 2016, the University of Strathclyde embarked upon a project: to design and run an online course to support the transition of undergraduate students into university life prior to the start of the first semester.

This development built upon the expertise, knowledge and experience that the institution that had been established through the development of the staff development course Teaching and Learning Online (TALON) , combined with insight from the development of the University’s Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) portfolio. It was proposed that we develop a short, staff-facilitated, non-credit bearing online course using Myplace (using Moodle), the University’s Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), to support new undergraduate students making the transition into university life at Strathclyde.

In 2014, Strathclyde carried out a student-led project to examine undergraduate transitions into the institution. The resultant report identified three key areas in a student’s transition into University life: “getting accepted, arriving at University and getting started”. This online course would attempt to support these key recommendations. The course would support new Strathclyde students in feeling knowledgeable, supported and more confident about embarking upon university life – to bring forward the point which they felt they were “Strathclyders”.

Institutional Context

The 2014 student-led review identified the transition routes to University taken by undergraduates into Strathclyde and explored and identified the challenges and barriers that students encountered along the way.

The main themes identified from the study were:

1. Issues around academic and social integration;
2. The induction period;
3. Limited promotion of support services;
4. A lack of adequate preparation and skills for students beginning University.

The study highlighted the importance of the induction process which they said should be thought of “...as a longitudinal process and the gradual development of students’ core skills.” (University of Strathclyde, 2015).

Further to this study, in recent years, Scottish Government priorities have encouraged Universities to look at widening access routes into their institutions (The Scottish Government, 2016).

The Course – “We are Strathclyde”

The course was designed with four learning outcomes. New undergraduate University of Strathclyde students would:

- be introduced to academic skills whilst being orientated around university life and university services
- engage in reflective tasks to support them in feeling like University of Strathclyde students
- explore key skills that are necessary for success at university
- hear authentic student experiences from a diverse range of current University of Strathclyde students

The course was run over four weeks, with a recommended student effort of two hours per week. The course commenced in mid-August 2016 and finished in time for the commencement of Freshers’ Week.

Course Structure

The course was developed and hosted in the institutional VLE, Myplace, which is built on Moodle. The themes were as follows:

Week 1: Introductions, The University of Strathclyde and being a student.

Week 2: Independent learning, time management, library services and student support services.

Week 3: Lectures, technical services (IT help).

Week 4: Academic writing, University of Strathclyde Student Union (USSA), Careers service and what to expect in the first few weeks of University.

Figure 1 outlines the structure of the course activities and topics.

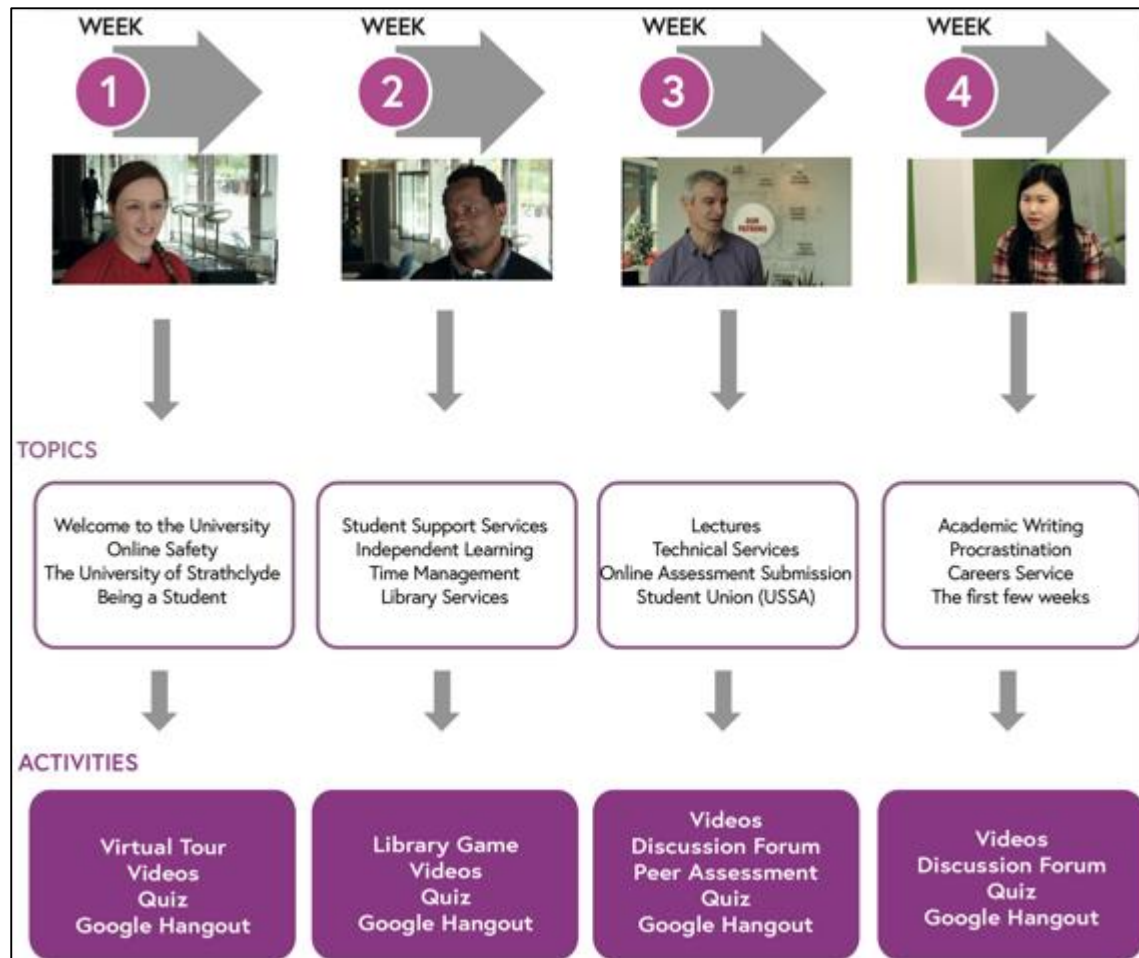


Figure 1 – Weekly Topics and Activities

Course Development Principles

Garrison, Anderson et al. (1999) outlined their model of cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence being required for online learning. Cognitive presence exists where students are able to develop meaning through reflection and engagement with others. This required the course to be activity-based, supporting active and reflective learning and encouraging engagement with other learners. An example of this approach can be seen in a set of early tasks. The first stage of the task set asks a simple question (Figure 2).

1.8 Task: Discussion - What is a university?

What do you think a university is? Give your own opinion (there's no single right answer) and then you can find out what current staff and students had to say.

Figure 2 – Task 1.8

Students then watched a variety of University staff with their (wide-ranging) personal responses to this question (Figure 3).



Figure 3 – Task 1.9

The third part of the set prides an opportunity for reflection as it asks for the students' response to similarities or differences between their own responses and that of current students and members of staff (Figure 4).

1.10 Task: Discussion - What is a university? - further thoughts

You've posted your thoughts about what a university is in the discussion task 1.8 and you've listened to current students and members of staff give their opinion in the video in 1.9. How did your thoughts line up with those you saw? In the discussion, tell us:

- What, if anything, surprised you about what others said?
- Is it similar or different to what you said yourself? Remember – just because a current student or member of staff didn't echo what you said doesn't mean you're wrong.

Figure 4 – Task 1.10

Social presence has been defined as “the ability of learners to project themselves socially and affectively into a community of inquiry” (coi.athabasca.ca, n.d.). Each discussion forum set up in the course was aligned with a single activity. In this way students who were comfortable posting were able to present themselves through responses to structured tasks and opportunity progression through comfort with the environment and through socialisation on the course could be supported (Salmon, 2003). Progression through the course required discussions to be viewed (however briefly) but did *not* require students to post responses as the course developers considered that this level of compulsion would be a deterrent to continuation in what was an optional course.

Teaching presence in this context is defined as “the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes” (Garrison, Anderson et al. 1999, p. 90). The course was designed as a fully moderated course with staff supporting students throughout, whether in forums, by email or by phone. However, the course design aimed to limit this to be manageable by a small team, through tasks being student-focussed insofar as the highly structured nature of the task sets required only low levels of moderator intervention. Further, the authority and “face” of the course at the immediate start of the course (and each week) by short to-camera introductory videos from a member of the course team. “Welcome to the week” emails, signed by the course lead, discussed the week’s activity in the course and looked forward to the next week. End-of-week live online broadcast sessions allowed asynchronous and live exchanges on issues discussed in forums through the week.

Where video was used, the length of any clip was kept to less than six minutes, with each video limited to one focus. All tasks were numbered to provide students (and indeed staff) with clear navigation through the course. The type of task was also clear before students began the task e.g. discussion, quiz, video etc.

The course was opened to participants in the four weeks preceding the commencement of Freshers’ Week. The course was opened one week at a time to ensure, within limits, that a cohort of student would be moving through the weeks together.

Adopted from Strathclyde’s development of MOOCs was the use of a dramatic narrative throughout the course. In “We are Strathclyde” this followed three fictional University of Strathclyde students Tariq, Sharon and Mikey. Students followed their story over their first year at University, with the narrative matching the focus weeks as they progressed.

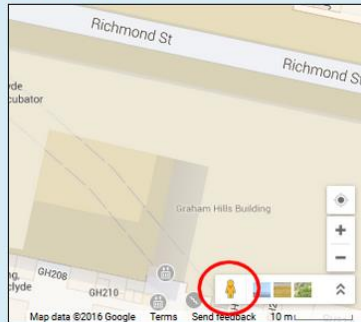
Twenty-two videos were created and added to the course, comprising of the narrative story along with members of staff and university students discussing the various topics in each week.

Tools such as short quizzes with formative feedback were distributed at key points throughout the course. Polls were another popular activity adopted from development of Strathclyde’s MOOCs. In “Introduction to Forensic Science” MOOC (FutureLearn, n.d.), polls are used in each week with learners invited to return at the conclusion of the course for the “big reveal” of the poll results and further analysis from the course educator. This was used in “We Are Strathclyde” in discussions of the impact of students’ decisions regarding their studying and work-life balance.

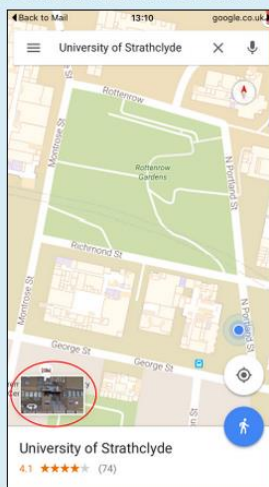
Use was made of tools from outside of the VLE. To help students orientate themselves with the campus, Google Maps StreetView (Figure 5) was embedded within a quiz. Students had to establish the location of various key University buildings and points of interest around campus, with hints provided. In this way, it was hoped that a degree of early familiarity with the campus layout would be established. Other activities included introducing students to our mobile app with accompanying tasks requesting that they answer various questions “How many free PCs are there on campus?” and “How busy is the gym just now?” (the answers to which the app can provide).

Google StreetView

The campus is the buildings and open spaces that make up the university. Google Maps lets you see the campus map. Here's a link that shows you [Richmond Street, where the McCance building is](#). If you're on a PC, you'll see an icon of a little person which you can drag onto the map to see the view of the street - it's circled in red in the screenshot here:



If you're using a mobile, you'll get a street view by clicking on the icon on the bottom left of the screen circled in red in this screenshot:



You should be able to see (with a little bit of moving around the streets of the campus), a view such as this:

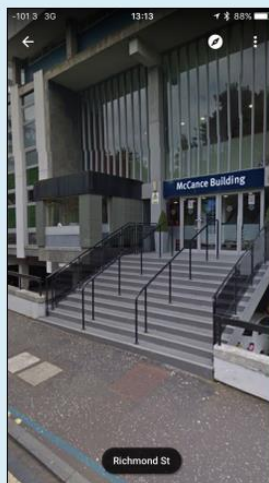


Figure 5 – Google StreetView Task

The “Library Game” was developed by library staff and placed students in a position of Tariq, one of the fictional students in the narrative. This activity placed the student in the role of Tariq and they had to choose what Tariq should do next based upon the scenarios posed on screen (Figure 6).

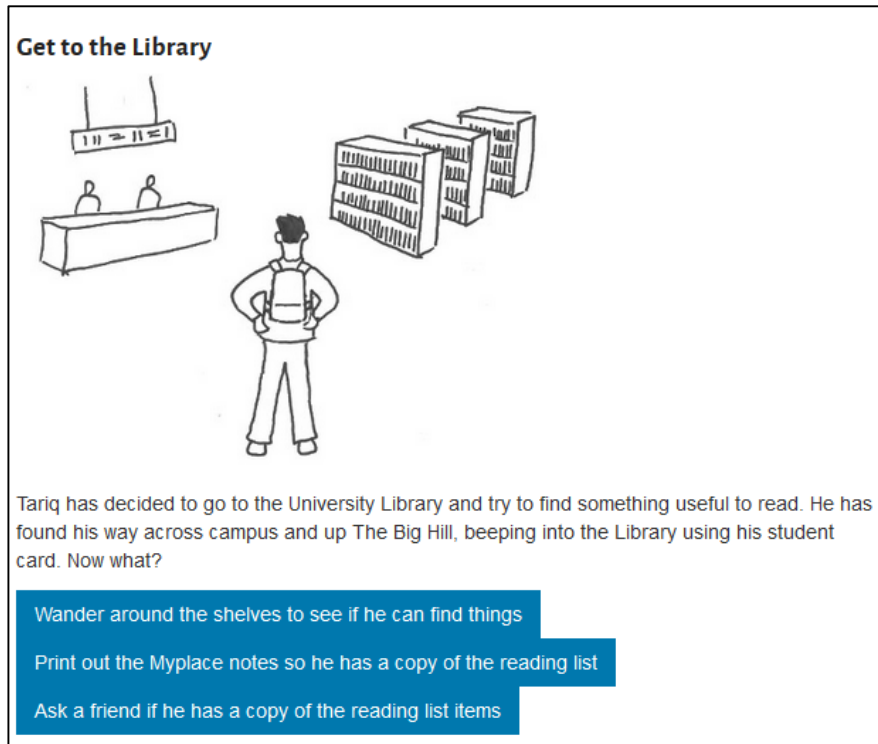


Figure 6 – the Library Game

Live online broadcast sessions (Google Hangouts) took place at the end of each week with senior staff, staff members from support services and Student Union representatives were invited to take part (Figure 7). This allowed personal insights into how the course was progressing to be shared, picking out and responding to comments and questions left by students throughout the week.



1.15 Invitation: Week 1 - a live online event

by We are Strathclyde - Monday, 29 August 2016, 4:34 PM



What is it?

On this course, learners will have the opportunity to ask the educators particular questions through live events called Google+ Hangouts on Air. They're like being a fly on the wall in a video conference call. These events are not mandatory but can be a fun way to get to know your course leaders and fellow Strathclyde students. These events also allow the educator to recap over the previous week.

We will discuss the content of the course so far and the developments in the Students' story.

When does it take place?

Our first Google Hangout took place on **Friday 19 August (this has now passed)**. You can view the Hangout on YouTube:



Figure 7 – Google Hangout Live Synchronous Session

Student Enrolment

One of the most challenging aspects of running a course over the summer months was how to contact incoming undergraduate students to make them aware of the course. It was further complicated by the fact that when the start date of mid-August was set, a large proportion of the undergraduate students are yet to confirm if they would be taking their place at the University as some were awaiting their exam results. It was decided that this would start by contacting those students who had confirmed acceptance in early July, some six weeks before the course commenced. In partnership with Student Business (the registration department), the course team collated lists of incoming students in batches as their status was confirmed.

A comprehensive invitation email was constructed which alerted students to the course, what it was about and why it would be of benefit to them. Stress was placed on the fact that the course

was not compulsory but that it was felt students would benefit from participating. A video course trailer was created¹, using a similar style to that used when creating course trailers for Strathclyde's MOOCs. The brief one minute trailer contained video, images and on-screen text with no narration. The trailer was embedded near to the top of the student invitation email. The enrolment process for students was relatively straightforward and simple. At the bottom of the email was a link to the VLE and once students logged in, they had self-enrolled themselves onto the course.

The email campaign continued right through the summer as students were confirming their registration status right through the month of August and September. Once students had enrolled themselves onto the course, they received a "Welcome to the Course" email from the course team thanking them for enrolling themselves and reminding them of the date and time the course commences. A discussion area was setup in the "welcome area" of the course allowing students to ask any questions before the course began. On Monday 15th August at 9am, the course opened automatically and gave access to enrolled students.

Observations and Future Plans

Feedback from staff and students has, to date, been highly positive with staff across the institution reporting greater and earlier student awareness of facilities and opportunities. While a full evaluation of the course has been undertaken by the institution, the course feedback questionnaire showed that, by the end of the course 73% of students were confident about starting at Strathclyde compared to 59% at the beginning of the course, and the proportion of students who were "not confident" had halved between the pre-and post-course questionnaire.

While the reflective and activity-based approach of the course design worked well for many students, those who declined to participate, or who dropped out of the course before the conclusion must be considered. The difficulties of communicating with 4,000 incoming students, when considering their diversity in age, background, expectation and concerns, are considerable. The course was, by necessity, created as "one size fits all". Having completed a successful first run, a demand has arisen for bespoke versions or pathways which could more closely cater for groups of students such as international, postgraduate and mature students.

The diverse range of activities, and their reflective nature, proved both successful and generally popular with students. However, as with all massive online courses, the non-compulsory, non-credit-bearing aspects is reflected in lower completion rates than in face-to-face courses (Times Higher Education (THE), 2017). Incentives, such as the ability to include completion of the course as an early contribution to a student's Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), may support efforts to improve this.

¹ <https://youtu.be/oX-yBGtPRWY>

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